

Accusations fly over misusing public money in fight over ambulance fee

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The debate over Montgomery County's ambulance fee has turned nasty just two weeks before voters decide its fate, with both sides accusing the other of misusing public money and trust for political purposes.

Critics of the ambulance fee argue that firefighters are canvassing for the measure while on duty -- and in full uniform -- instead of doing normal firefighter work. County Executive Ike Leggett's office should not be pumping money into fliers, posters and other promotional material about the fee, they also say.

On the flip side, at least one County Council member says volunteer firefighters, who are attempting to spike the new law, are quietly using public donations to ratchet up false rhetoric against the fee.

"I don't want money that should be spent in this community to protect citizens to go to a bunch of pollsters and spin doctors, do you?" said Councilwoman Duchy Trachtenberg, D-at large, during a news conference Tuesday with Leggett.

When asked by The Washington Examiner about Leggett's office using taxpayer money on fliers about the ambulance fee, she responded, "That's not the same thing. They are educating people, not telling them how to vote."

Maryland's highest court ordered the referendum placed on the ballot after local election officials disqualified the majority of 53,000 signatures against the fee.

Under the measure, county residents' insurance companies would be charged between \$300 and \$800 per ambulance ride. Uninsured residents are not required to pay the fee, and noncounty residents would be on the hook for any cost not covered by their insurance companies.

Eric Bernard, executive director of the volunteer firefighters, says some politicians are confusing activism with governing.

"Isn't it ironic that while the law was in effect, they didn't devote any time or money to outreach?" he said. "But then after the court decision, they magically decide to launch this so-called 'education'? "

Leggett has said the county would cut nearly one of every 10 firefighters if voters reject the fee, remove police officers from schools, and reduce service for seniors and the homeless.

He dismissed claims of electioneering.

"This is an easy issue to demagogue," he said. "All that talk is silly."

Leggett spokesman Patrick Lacefield said he did not know how much has been spent on outreach, estimating at least 20,000 fliers have been distributed. The brochure is also displayed on the home page of the county's Web site.

Fire Chief Richard Bowers said his workers are allowed to hand out the materials, even on duty, because "they have the same freedom of speech as everyone else."